



THE SUFI AND THE BEARDED MAN

RE-MEMBERING A KERAMAT IN CONTEMPORARY SINGAPORE

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The Sufi and the Bearded Man: Re-membering a Keramat in Contemporary Singapore

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FOREWORD

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DEVELOPED OVER A PERIOD OF TWO YEARS beginning in 2009, the project *The Sufi and the Bearded Man: Re-membering a Keramat in Contemporary Singapore* began as a series of email exchanges between Teren Sevea and the Museum on the impending closure of the Siti Maryam shrine situated at Stadium Link, Kallang. As a researcher specialising in Muslim saints and the publics that sustain the practices associated to the shrines, the closure raises questions about the status and place of such sites and its communities within the formal structures of 'heritage-making' in Singapore. Around the same time, the Museum had just embarked on its own research project relating to the development of museums during the period of British Malaya, eventually resulting in an exhibition *Camping and Tramping: Through the Colonial Archive: The Museum in Malaya*, which opened in January 2011. As a curatorial project, *Camping and Tramping* is conceived as a fluid encounter with museum collections and texts mainly from 1874 to 1959, as an attempt to render open readings into the emergence and transformations of early museological institutions, isolating and presenting a particular historical resource that facilitates perspectives pertinent to the shifting roles and limits of institutions engendered by their tasks of collecting and archiving.

In pairing *The Sufi and the Bearded Man* alongside *Camping and Tramping*, reflections into these questions of 'roles and limits' are hopefully rendered significant, demonstrating the dynamics and constraints of museological practice, referenced to its sense of universal burden and contingencies. In some ways, the composition of the project team – consisting of Nurul Huda B. A. Rashid, Shabbir Hussain Mustafa and Teren Sevea, working alongside the caretakers of the shrine – marked such predicaments. Teren's accounting of the shrine's history and its community proposes an urgency in the face of contemporary religious and institutional attitudes towards *sufis* and *keramats*. For Teren, even as this

project attempts to introduce to a general audience the significance of the Siti Maryam shrine, its service to the issues of heritage and loss may still be elusive. Within the context of an art museum, this anxiety takes on a particular dimension. The photographic documentations by Nurul and the curation by Mustafa could not have been undertaken without a sense of self-reflexivity, struggling with the mediated nature of the museum experience even as they insist on the significant and the real. Nurul reflects her struggle: "all would merely exist as fragments: compartmentalised, categorised and curated." These fragments are materials scavenged on the day that the shrine was torn down; residual, incomplete, and mobilised as a curatorial undertaking, problematic in their new incarnation as artefacts placed in what we regard as an art museum. These objects are organised in a manner that is installative, simultaneously aestheticised and made fluidly relational to the photographic images and texts, consisting exclusively of the voices of Wak Ali Janggut, the principal custodian of the shrine, and others associated to it, as a whole resisting linearity and insisting multiple entries and readings, and rendering its own incompleteness. It is this 'incompleteness' that perhaps situate the potential value of such approach allowing for individuated and opened encounters, as reflected by Mustafa: "to present the keramat's life-worlds in the words of the individuals as they describe it and to at least attempt to separate our conclusions from theirs", a simultaneous distancing and intimacy that is productive rather than prescriptive.

The NUS Museum wishes to thank Wak Ali and those who participated in interviews and research that went into the exhibition. A number of materials and documents exhibited were provided by Wak Ali. We are also grateful to many others for their kind partnership and assistance rendered through the course of the project preparations as well as for the series of public programmes initiated for the exhibition.

"The grace of Sharifah Siti Maryam has taken on a material form during various occasions within the space of Kallang. We can learn from Ali about various encounters he has had with *djinns* [or spirits] while residing in the shrine. One such occasion that we all remember is when they were trying to redevelop the area surrounding the old kampung into a riverside park through clearing projects. Workers and the bulldozer [*jentolak*] were sent to push [*tolak*] the tree that is central to the shrine, but what we saw instead was heavy *djinntolak* [spirits pushing], they didn't let the tree move. These spirits while heavy and powerful, and residing in the shrine, leave no trail and are invisible even to devotees, but show themselves to people who obstruct the *kera-mat*."

Abas Ali al-Aydarus, Traditional Healer, Sungei Siput (Perak), 2009





LISTENING TO LEAVES

HISTORICAL MEMORY OF A KERAMAT IN CONTEMPORARY SINGAPORE

TEREN SEVEA

is a PhD candidate at the University of California, Los Angeles. His research interests include Muslim saints and brotherhoods in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia.

This space of *keramat* is sacred dense with supernatural beings, plants where fortune-altering spirits reside – whoever doesn't believe about the *wali Allah* (the friend of God) should listen to the leaves.

– Wak Aiyim, Sungei Kallang, 2009

WAK AIYIM, A DEVOTEE AND CARETAKER of the flora surrounding the shrine of Siti Maryam al-Aydarus (d. 1854) at Stadium Link, Kallang (Singapore), passed on weeks after the removal of the shrine complex in April 2010. Like the custodian of Siti Maryam's shrine, Mohamed Hassan or Wak Ali Janggut (the bearded Ali), Wak Aiyim was an active transmitter of oral traditions surrounding the "*keramat*" (from Arabic *karama*, 'miracle') at Sungei Kallang, a term that came to connote both the 'living' miracle-working saint and her miracle-working shrine complex for both these story-tellers. Facing material challenges, in terms of the declining patronage of devotees from Southeast Asia and the possible destruction of the mausoleum, I was invited by Wak Ali to compile oral traditions or testimonies pertaining to the history of Siti Maryam. This exercise, which commenced in March 2008 and is ongoing (since the *keramat* lives on beyond the physical life of the saint and her tomb), has involved documenting the anecdotes, dreams, visions, hearsay (circulating stories that help devotees grapple with tradition) and meditative reflections of devotees of Siti Maryam – some of these imaginings are presented in the gallery, *The Sufi and the Bearded Man*. My primary informants included: firstly, Wak Ali; secondly, a traditional healer or *bomoh*, Abas Ali al-Aydarus, who is presently in Sungei Siput, Perak; thirdly, Wak Aiyim; fourthly, a patron and devotee, Wak Isa; and fifthly, custodian of the tomb of Sharifah Ruqaiyah (d. 1891), Muhammad Ridhwan.

The "space of *keramat*" that Wak Aiyim introduces us to in the aforementioned testimony is a section of the approxi-

mately 2¼ acres large "Malay Kallang Burial Ground" that was established in 1852 to be "used by the inhabitants of four Kampung [Kampung Kopet, Klapa, Rokoh and Batin], and other persons of the Mohammedan religion, for the purpose of burying their dead without any burial fee being charged".¹ In an article "Judgment in the Malay Burial Ground Dispute" in *The Straits Times*, dated 12 June 1899, we learn of a "deed":

executed on March 18th 1852, [under which] this ground, in consideration of the sum of Rs. 26, was conveyed to three persons [identified by Wak Ali as Inche Andak, Inche Dollah and Inche Samban] named therein and described as 'Trustees of the Malay Kallang Burial Ground' [...] evidence [reveals] that the Malays, the inhabitants of the four *kampung*s in the immediate vicinity, used this ground prior to 1852... the ground has been in a manner kept clean, and the fences repaired by subscriptions collected among them.²

The historical memory of Siti Maryam's devotees, however, is one geared towards re-membering the "Malay Kallang Burial Ground" as one wherein *keramat* existed and/or exists. As it dawned upon me, in the course of recording the testimonies of caretakers, patrons and devotees of the *keramat*, these narrations were not simply recollecting the past of the Burial Ground, but *re-membering* it "according to a schema placing historical agency primarily in the hands of an elect Sufi few".³ Indeed, these testimonies appear to be preoccupied with representing the "Malay" Burial Ground as a "space of *keramat*" coloured with tombs, pedagogies and miracles of peripatetic Hadhrami saints from al-Aydarus, al-Qadri, al-Bukhari and al-Attas lineages – the most prominent of these saints are Siti Maryam and two al-Qadri saints whose tombs were exhumed in December 2009 (these saints were

referred to by devotees as Panglima Puteh and Panglima Hitam). Like “traditions of ethno-history among India’s coastal and maritime communities”, the traditions of ethno-history in this part of Islamicate Singapore revolve around miraculous migrations of holy men and women across the Indian Ocean and the foundation of Muslim settlements through the arrival of seafaring sayyids and sayyidahs. I must admit that I have struggled (perhaps due to positivist methods of research) with how these testimonies have been ambiguous over the precise date or period of, or visions of the earlier-interned saint that led to, the establishment of Siti Maryam’s mausoleum that appears to be a popular Muslim shrine by the early twentieth-century.⁴ However, the seeming lack of “historical” detail or chronology is a secondary concern to “traditions of ethno-history” that provide exceptionally rich detail on how an Alawi sayyidah saint, or patrilineal descendant of the prophet Muhammad through Ahmad bin ‘Isa, ‘the Migrant’ (d. 956), was: firstly, plugged into nineteenth-century Indian Ocean maritime networks preserved by trans-oceanic mercantile, genealogical and Islamic relationships, and possibly, new travel routes facilitated by the maritime geography of *pax brittanica*; and secondly, central to the foundation of a majestic Muslim settlement at Sungei Kallang marked by its shrines, religious schools, ulama and Islamic publication centers, a stark contrast to the pre-Siti Maryam Sungei Kallang that merely found temporary (and at times, belligerent) populations of Orang Suku Laut, Javanese, Bugis and Bawean.⁵

As students of history, we struggle with “traditions of ethno-history” that involve stories, dreams, visions or hearsay related to a golden age and majesty of the *keramat*, noble genealogies or roots of the saint, miraculous and arduous travels and maps, and magical or miraculous powers of the *keramat* (powers that range from ending the lives of individuals attempting to disturb the existence of the shrine to pro-

viding Siti Maryam’s intermediary, Wak Ali, almost-physical encounters with God and His intermediary, Siti Maryam). One way out of this impasse is paved by Carl Ernst who suggests “Western modes of literary criticism” that reject the “inauthentic” and “spurious” nature of orally-transmitted sufi “oral discourse literature” often ignore the “internal critical categories” and didactic functions of such sources.⁶ Like Ernst, the historians of colonial Africa, Steven Feierman and Luise White, propose that oral sources that “appear irrational in terms of the logic of academic historical narratives” can serve as historical evidence proper since they provide unparalleled insights into the didactic value of such oral sources within the worlds of narrators.⁷ As White says, privileging rumour, gossip and fantasy – prime resources for the study of non-literate saint cults such as Siti Maryam’s – allows us to access the “very stuff of history, the categories and constructs with which people make their worlds”.⁸ If we adopt such an approach to the history of Siti Maryam, oral sources are not simply a “repository for inert chunks of the past”, but rather more complex insights into worlds of storytellers preoccupied with perpetuating the *vilayat* (sanctity) and *baraka* or *berkat* (spiritual power) of the saint among followers.⁹

The oral traditions on *keramat* Siti Maryam, coloured by oblique references to ‘real’ events, could on the one hand, trouble the conventional historian but on the other, excite the historian searching for the aforementioned “real stuff of history” because they provide exceptional detail on an Islamicate devotional religion of informants. This ‘religion’ of informants was one preoccupied with basic questions of power such as the power to survive epidemics, be healed from sickness and secure employment, powers that the saint possessed and her powerless clients attained through devotion to her.¹⁰ For example, throughout the historical memory of Siti Maryam’s life, she figures as the magical healer of illnesses, facilitator of healthy climate or weather, securer of employment



“This space is sacred, I have been visiting the *keramat* since I was young and have seen various supernatural incidents. The area has plants of various species where spirits reside and no one can have the audacity to impinge upon its sovereignty. Ali always said that spiritual beings visit the *keramat* but I saw it for myself one day. After I had finished work – I used to be a barber at a tree behind [northeastern side of the] shrine – I fell asleep only to be woken up by a vision. I was shocked when I saw the faces of Hang Tuah, Hang Kasturi, Hang Jebat, Hang Lekir and Hang Lekiu on the five trunks of the tree. I then wrapped five pieces of yellow cloth around the trunks of a tree with five stems – it was opposite the tree I worked at. Other spirits are at the shrine always to watch over people and reveal their powers whenever there is misconduct.”

Wak Aiyim, Custodian, *Keramat* Siti Maryam, Sungei Kallang, 2009

and trade and markets, and protector of various groups such as fishermen, sailors, travelers and coastal communities in Singapore, Malaya and the Nusantara (Indonesia) through interceding with God on their behalf and through her 'sea knowledge.' Comparing such anecdotes with available written records allows researchers to further access the vulnerable nineteenth-century 'small town' worlds of narrators and story-tellers.¹¹ Indeed, the "small settlements on the islets among the mangrove-swamps [... where residents] suffered a great deal from malaria" appear to have provided the ideal setting for the revelation of Siti Maryam's miraculous healing or therapeutic powers both during her lifetime and beyond (via the mausoleum at the erstwhile malaria colony).¹² Similarly, colonial and post-colonial records on municipal engineering or urban development in Sungei Kallang should complement stories of Siti Maryam's ability to alleviate residents' (both living and interned) and devotee's anxieties through stalling bulldozers, inspiring awe, determining the life and death of urban developers, and invoking the flora of the "space of *keramat*" to refuse removal through methods ranging from bleeding to birthing children. Furthermore, perhaps geared towards addressing the dangers of coastal communities, we find numerous oral traditions pertaining to: firstly, animals from the sea including snakes and crocodiles that were subjected to devotion by Siti Maryam, and protected her shrine and in turn, her intermediaries such as Wak Ali who has a *kembar ular* (twin snake) or *kembar buaya* (twin crocodile); and secondly, the epistemic rupture, *fath* or 'opening' of human reality, facilitated by Siti Maryam through plunging her "younger brother" Wak Ali into the sea, protecting him for periods ranging from six to seven days at a go without any oxygen-support machines, and rescuing him through visions, voices and *cahaya* (light, as revealed by God).¹³

These oral traditions on *keramat* Siti Maryam are more sig-

nificant if we consider the relatively marginal position of caretakers, patrons and devotees of the shrine in contemporary Singapore. Beyond simply being part of the debated category of "working class", the transmitters of traditions appear to struggle to "carve out unlicensed and unregulated spaces beyond the [modern, bureaucratic] state's reach" through keeping alive a memory of an age of Islamic grandiose and ultimate sovereignty of the *sufi*.¹⁴ Traditions preoccupied with the powers and sovereignty of the *keramat* have little to say about the extra-shrine transformations of the "Malay Burial Ground" such as: the January 1940 "indenture of conveyance" (the trustee purchased two properties at 438 and 440 Pasir Panjang Road for the Ground's maintenance); the acquisition of the Ground by state authorities in 1982; and the authority of the present *mutawalli* (trustee of the religious endowment, waqf Malay Kallang Burial Ground), the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) over matters and the existence of the shrine complex. Wak Ali's historical memory for instance, is mainly preoccupied with establishing the sovereignty of the *keramat* over both 'real' bodies or institutions and supernatural challenges, and defending a customary Islam at play at the Kallang *keramat* which was dismissed by reformist Muslims as being "unorthodox" or even "un-Islamic" but indeed, spiritually superior to simply "exoteric displays of religion". Furthermore, almost preempting literate, reform-oriented critiques of oral traditions based on literal interpretations of 'orthodox' texts, Wak Ali and Abas Ali regularly reminded me of how: orally-transmitted traditions were merely imitating the Quran and *hadith* which were orally transmitted; their hagiographical anecdotes were derived through chains of "reliable mouth to mouth" transmission that appear modelled upon similar chains or *isnad* used to validate the pedigree of *hadith*; the dreams or visions of Siti Maryam (a heir of the prophet Muhammad) operated as a secondary form of revelation for devotees¹⁵; and, how the *ilmu* (esoteric religious knowledge) Wak Ali has gained through devotion to



"The tree at the eastern end of the *keramat* contains a passageway that is the point of entry for spirits – this is the entry into the cave, cave is like a palace [...] Before this there was the tomb – this big hut that surrounds the tomb and the place I live in were all built with the donations of a Chinese businessman. There are too many episodes of people coming here and being blessed to survive epidemics, to be healed from sickness and secure employment. She is the healer of illnesses, protector of fishermen, travelers and coastal communities, interceding with God on their behalf. Blessings are a two way process, we must believe wholeheartedly and then we can see her powers in our lives."

Wak Ali Janggut, Custodian, *Keramat* Siti Maryam, Sungei Kallang, 2009



Tomb of Siti Maryam, Sungei Kallang, 2010.

Siti Maryam and utilised for healing purposes and being an intermediary of supernatural beings, is of an unproblematic Islamic quality, in the fashion of the “*ilmu* of all the Islamic prophets from Adam to Muhammad”.

Possibly aware of the derisive pessimism of historians and reformist Muslims alike, Wak Ali repeatedly cautioned me against viewing the oral traditions pertaining to the *keramat* as being “myth-ales or entertainment”, even at the expense of denying how oral traditions were possibly ‘licitly’ entertaining for audiences at or pilgrims to the shrine. On the one hand, it may be briefly consoling for the devotees of Siti Maryam who bereave the loss of the shrine complex, to know that *The Sufi and the Bearded Man* makes a very

humble attempt to depict, albeit selectively, their ‘historical memory’ or ‘self-history’ of the *keramat*. On the other hand, as one of the proponents of *The Sufi and the Bearded Man*, I struggle to convince myself that this exhibit has been of service to “the Bearded Man” who: in April 2010, ploughed through an industrial garbage bin to pluck out remains of the shrine for the exhibit; in January 2011, scrambled to clear a tentage or canopy, furniture and other remaining artefacts of the shrine after encroaching upon State Land (which he envisaged as the “space of *keramat*”); fails to receive sufficient or any attention from certain individuals patronising the NUS Museum wherein “his” artefacts are being displayed, due to his illiteracy, class background and unkempt appearance; and, struggles daily to convince audiences about how

Siti Maryam refused to be exhumed in April 2010, displaying once again her supernatural powers. I wonder while writing this and reflecting on *The Sufi and the Bearded Man* whether we have *listened to the leaves*.

ENDNOTES

1. “Burial Ground Dispute”, *The Straits Times* (6 June 1899),
2. “Municipal Engineer’s Office: Report upon the Present Burial Grounds within Three Miles Radius of the Cathedral of Singapore”, *Straits Observer* (21 September 1875), 3.
2. Justice Hyndman Jones, “Judgment in the Malay Burial Ground Dispute”, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (12 June 1899), 3.
3. Nile Green, “Stories of Saints and Sultans: Re-membling History at the Sufi Shrines of Aurangabad”, *Modern Asian Studies* 38, 2 (2004), 445-6.
4. Yahya, “Singapore’s Keramats”, *The Straits Times* (11 June 1939), 16.
5. Green, “Saints, Rebels and Booksellers: Sufis in the Cosmopolitan Western Indian Ocean, c.1850-1920”, in Kai Kresse & Edward Simpson (eds.), *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean* (London/New York: Hurst/Columbia UP, 2007), 127.
6. Carl Ernst, ‘The Textual Formation of Oral Teachings in the Early Chishti Order,’ in *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 62, 77.
7. Cited from Steven Feierman, ‘Colonizers, Scholars, and the Creation of Invisible Histories,’ in Lynn Hunt and Victoria Bonnell (eds.) *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 186; also, see Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California

8. White, *Speaking with Vampires*, 55.
9. Cited from Barbara Cooper, ‘Oral Sources and the Challenge of Writing African History,’ in John Philips (ed.), *Writing African History* (Rochester University Press, 2005), 200. See Farooq Hamid, ‘The Hagiographic Process: The Case of Medieval Chishti Sufi Far d al-D n Mas’ d Ganj-i Shakar (d. 664/1265),’ *The Muslim World* 90 (2007), 422-4.
10. Refer to Green, Making a ‘Muslim’ Saint: Writing Customary Religion in an Indian Princely State”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, 3 (2005), 622.
11. See Green, “Jack Sepoy and the Dervishes: Islam and the Indian Soldier in Princely Hyderabad”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18, 1 (2008), 36.
12. Yahya, “Singapore’s Keramats”, 16.
13. For a discussion on fath or ‘opening’, a true epistemic rupture of everyday reality, being a genuine revelation from God, see Green, “The Religious and Cultural Roles of Dreams and Visions in Islam”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 13, 3 (2003), 293.
14. Vineeta Sinha, *A New God in the Diaspora? Muneeswaran Worship in Contemporary Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), 251.
15. Green, ‘Translating the Spoken Words of the Saints: Oral Literature and the Sufis of Aurangabad,’ in Lynne Long (ed.) *Translation and Religion: Holy Untranslatable?* (Multilingual Matters Limited, 2005), 44; Ernst, ‘The Textual Formation of Oral Teachings in the Early Chishti Order,’ 62.



"Whosoever tried to undertake this [act of felling the tree], especially they who held negative intentions, had received their consequences...in the midst of their attempt to cut the branches and twigs, suddenly they saw a male child of eight years of age materialise and exit from inside the shrine. They were all flabbergasted and didn't know how to react. Their whole bodies were drenched with cold sweat as they were fettering with fear [...] [on a separate occasion] both those laborers had already climbed upon this tree but, without proceeding, had fallen off and immediately died. Another event that was strange but true occurred when a group of workers [...] [were] sawing a branch of this tree, suddenly blood flowed and trickled out, spilling from the tree. The worker panicked and immediately ran back abandoning the space. He fell ill and people say, he died [...]"

Hj. Nordin Lisut, Writer, *Darah keluar dari pokok yang ditebang* (Blood flowed out from the tree), 1987



“SHE’S STILL HERE”

A RECOLLECTION

NURUL HUDA B. A. RASHID

is a Photographer/Researcher who uses the visual as medium and method of conceptualising.

IT STARTED WITH A PICTURE, a picture of an unidentified woman, sitting with her hands held up in *do’a* (prayer), neatly framed and hung in the middle of the space. She was the first image I saw upon my entry into the *keramat* of Siti Maryam. I wondered then if it was a photo of the saint herself. I was told that it was not. I walked into the space armed with nostalgia, aware that the sights before me would soon be no more.

I was invited to be part of this project as a photographer. Mustafa, the curator, called to ask if I would be interested in documenting the space of a *keramat*, soon to be exhumed. My initial thoughts were that we would have to engage in a method of salvage anthropology, one that involved collecting and documenting anything and everything, for all would soon be displaced, dispossessed. All would merely exist as fragments: compartmentalised, categorised and curated. Would these fragments be recognised, or would they too, like all that have been plucked out in the name of modernisation, fall prey to the cloak of indifference? I see two men walk into the gallery space of *The Sufi and the Bearded Man*. They merely walk through it, unfazed by the mysticism of the stories, the obscurity of the objects, or even Pak Ali's portrait, as he stands watch.

Rivers of colour occupy the *keramat*: Yellow flows across the space as curtains, cloth to cover the tombstones, and in erect pillars that hold up the home; there were the rich browns of the earth, womb to the departed peacefully resting within; the rainbows of flower petals scattered across the different graves, some thoughtfully arranged in vases; the greens of nearby trees, and the white of light that fall within. These were soon sucked out, replaced by the dry and brittle, brought about by the hands of machines, as instructed by the hands of structure. The tree was butchered and uprooted, like shards of glass, its form lost upon breakage. Grass was shaved off and the moisture of the earth, reduced into

rubble and clumps of clay. The air felt parched that day as all was exposed.

Chance brought me to the *keramat* that fateful day. I was looking through the photos I had of the space and realised that there was not enough. Knowing the inevitable exhumation and demolition of the space, I felt the need to visually document the space in its entirety: from the architecture to the structure, the objects that lived within, and the people surrounding it. Alas, I was not granted permission to do so. Instead, when I reached the space, the physical structure of the *keramat* was in the midst of being demolished. Tents were erected, drills were stationed alongside concrete and men were scattered about, each moving as instructed by duties. There were three individuals under a tree furthest away from the *keramat*; they were overlooking the smooth operation of the demolition. They were the people of structure, estranged and yet deeply involved. I ventured into the site of the *keramat* and acknowledged the workers. It was a very hot day, they said. I agreed. I then made my way to the tree opposite the *keramat*, where Pak Ali and his friends were methodically removing things from. There are many things from the *keramat*, Pak Ali told me as he packed pots and daily utensils into boxes. I walked around taking as many photos as I could, as many as needed. I then made my way to the tree to sit with Pak Ali, his friends and *some* of the contents of the *keramat* - others were discarded into bins.

On the day of the exhumation itself, no photography was allowed. It was 'routine procedure', they said. Hence, no photos were taken of the actual exhumation. It left a punctuated gap in an otherwise perfect linear visual narrative of the *keramat*. All that was documented were the stories as told to us by Pak Ali; miracle stories that engage the audience to imagine and for some, question the space and existence of the *keramat*, its history and hereafter.



Portraits have always been a prominent genre of photography. Many great portraits do not merely capture faces within compositions, but illuminate the stories embedded within the lines mapped across the faces, the soft smiles, or perhaps, in an intense stare. When I first met Pak Ali, I instantly found him intriguing as a subject. He was open to being photographed and photographed very well. My first capture of Pak Ali was that of a smiling man. He was open to letting us move around the space of the *keramat*, allowing me to photograph whatever I wanted. He would also instruct me to capture a few photos he felt were important. Pak Ali was comfortable with me being around and could easily engage in his daily chores, despite my incessant clicking. I felt comfortable as well and soon, a rapport was built - something all

photographers aim for in such visual documentary projects. I however learned that not all rapport necessarily shouldered comfort. On the day of the exhumation, I captured a photograph of Pak Ali, one that had I not been there as a photographer, I would not have taken. But instead, I motioned for him to look at the camera, he did and so, I clicked. There are so many things one could read into this particular portrait of Pak Ali, one that we can guess, but only Pak Ali would know. It was at that point, perhaps, that I realised both the importance and triviality of photographs. They can tell so much, and yet, nothing.

There are people that still move in and out of the space of the *keramat*, even after its physical structure is now lost to his-



tory. They each bear a story of the space, of their relationship with Pak Ali and their beliefs. These stories were captured by Terenjit through oral narratives that have been placed alongside the photos and objects in the gallery. I would walk in the gallery space and realise that the narratives, the photos, and the objects, flanked against each other, were communicating in a language unbeknownst to anyone else. I look at the black and white photographs pasted onto gallery walls and mourn the loss of the *keramat*'s colours, one we did not wish to merely replicate. And so, as I documented the space of the *keramat*, visually, from beginning to end, my method changed. It shifted from an extensive capture of everything to a more personally-charged approach. There were some moments I chose not to capture, some which are not exhibited, and some, which I have entirely failed to document.

A picture is worth a thousand words, as the old adage goes. A thousand words, yes, but only to those who possess the right words to tell it. For those who do not, that is all it remains, the *possibility* of a thousand words: its story untold. I attempted to capture photographs that would allow you, the audience, a chance into stories, a thousand words. But alas, I did not always succeed. At certain points in time, it was a choice not to, for certain stories are best told in the thousand words of its own storyteller. The problem is, if you, the audience, would have access to the storyteller. The bigger problem would be, if you, the audience, would even care.

I see a group of people in *The Sufi and the Bearded Man* gallery. They are enthralled by the exhibition. Some remember the *keramat*. Some mourn its loss. New stories are told within the gallery space. Some tell stories of their growing up years in the *kampungs* along the Kallang River. Others tell stories that they have heard about the *keramat* and Siti Maryam. I see eyes that gasp in quiet amazement at the miracle stories. They move along the gallery space, inspect-

ing the objects, the stories and the photos; re-membering. We still visit Pak Ali at the *keramat*. On the spot where Siti Maryam was buried, we have seen different offerings of flowers from people who, according to Pak Ali, would often come to pay their respects. Pak Ali still goes to the *keramat* to sweep up the fallen dead leaves. He keeps the space clean. He would sweep the flower offerings days after they have dried up, but new flowers would always be spotted; fresh colours against the grass.

It was during the fasting month of *Ramadhan* when Pak Ali invited us to his home. During the day of the exhumation, we had asked if we could, along with the other objects we had collected, include the picture of the woman he had hung in the *keramat*. He said no, but said that if we wanted to, we could take a photo of it; he had hung it in his flat. And so we made our way to Pak Ali's flat, a place that was not really *home* for *home* for him was and would always be the *keramat*. After months of seeing the picture of the woman hung in the *keramat*, and later displaced into one of the boxes, I felt somewhat relieved to see it on the wall of Pak Ali's flat. I took a few photos of it as it stood against the orange wall that was now its home. I turned to Pak Ali and asked him again for the story of the picture. He nodded and smiled.



"I was around thirteen or fourteen years old, wherein I was visited by a snake, and I heard a voice that instructed me to go to a lake. I followed the directive of this dream and it was the first call for me to devote my life to the service of the shrine. This was the snake that was nurtured by, and the personal responsibility of, Kak Siti Maryam [...] I have not met the snake again but wise people have said that it exists in a different world – it is hard to meet it, all happens according to the power of God. It is more beautiful than me – a long time ago, upon just arriving at Pulau Penyengat, I was told that they had seen me there for seven days."

Wak Ali Janggut, Custodian, *Keramat Siti Maryam*, Sungei Kallang, 2009



"People of the four *kampungs* moved out following works to clear the area. The residents concentrated in the PWD quarters paid their obeisance daily [...] I cannot stay away from the shrine, as a *kuasa* [power] pulls me back [...] I worked with the coast guards, who called me whenever they needed someone to undertake risky operations [...] On one such diving expedition, I went to the bottom of the ocean and heard the voice of Kak Siti Maryam. I could not see her face but her voice sent a shudder through my body and gifted a smell that was extraordinary and from another world – she told me that I was not to leave her shrine!"

Wak Ali Janggut, Custodian, *Keramat* Siti Maryam, Sungei Kallang, 2008



CONFESSIONAL CURATION

SHABBIR HUSSAIN MUSTAFA

is currently Assistant Curator with the NUS Museum. His approach to understanding the arts is centred heavily on engaging with different archives of thinking and writing, all in the attempt at opening up the archives to multivarious struggles of perception and reading.

Method of this project: literary montage. I need say nothing. Only exhibit. I won't filch anything of value or appropriate any ingenious turns of phrase. Only the trivia, the trash – which I don't want to inventory, but simply allow it to come into its own in the only way possible: by putting it to use.

- Walter Benjamin, "Konvolut N", 1989

"Times have changed," Salleh continued. "The village teacher tells my children not to believe in ghosts." But a Kramat is a holy place, or a person or an animal with an Arabic name. And a Kramat is not afraid of railway trains and motorcars.

- Richard Winstedt, "A Malay Kramat", 1954

THIS HAS BEEN A CHALLENGING EXHIBITION TO CURATE and an even more difficult article to write. It is not the article that I imagined writing about at the early stages of this project. Had it been written earlier, it would have taken the form of an art essay, and would have relied less on the sense and details of discussing the limits of the modern museum. From the outset as the documentation of the *keramat* began in late 2009, it did not seem clear what sort of a guiding curatorial principle needed to be adopted. In the event that the *keramat* and its life-worlds would become anthropologically determined or historically documented or art historically celebrated, seemed a complex dilemma which did not instantly lend itself to clarity. The *keramat* objects, a term which loosely captures the scavenged objects on display and the various voices of those who narrate them, seemed so different from those of the museum culture where they would finally end up, albeit temporarily, making it almost impossible to do what I might have initially wished: to attempt presenting the "objects" from the perspectives of the different figures who made up the *keramat*. The curatorial method could only at-

tempt to portray how particular individuals live and speak about the objects that seemed so important to them. Some objects were said to contain amuletic and healing potentials, a complex which museums and their practitioners in the region have struggled to cope with since their institutionalisation from the late nineteenth-century. Such a dilemma was complicated further by the realisation that our friends at the *keramat* did not recognise the category of objects referred to as "art" and did not instantly identify "art experiences". There were aesthetic complexities, which were discussed, distinguishing them from more ordinary objects – but always within their own system of attributes. As a result, what was



Recovered fragments from the shrine. [Gallery impression, *The Suli and the Bearded Man*, NUS Museum, 2011]

assumed before seemed to have been relegated into an intervening space, a caveat of curatorial irreconcilability. The renewed sensibility needed to recognise that their understandings and appreciations of these objects were perhaps the opposite of those I had become accustomed to from a museum culture. Theirs focused on the spiritual or emotive presence of the object and less on the very physical attributes. While the museological rationality demanded and even actively sought out physical objects and their forms, all the while struggling to reconcile the metaphysical – wondering if such murmurs could find a place within their temporary home – the museum. I do not feel that either approach is wrong, but neither is complete, and this tension between them became one of the obsessions of this exhibition – at least from a curatorial point of view. Whilst I can only speak on behalf of the other collaborators in the project with some caution, Teren Sevea and Nurul Huda B. A. Rashid had their own struggles. Although we did not agree on all the finer points of the project, one measure remained certain: to present the *keramat*'s life-worlds in the words of the individuals as they described it and to at the least attempt to separate our conclusions from theirs. Naively (maybe?) assuming that each of our different roles in the project adds something to the overall understanding; each knowing something which the others might never know – this is of course, an ideal, open to criticism.

Considering both ends of the spectrum, as the gallery came to be installed: the emotions of those who patronised the *keramat* (of Wak Ali Janggut, in particular) and the connoisseur's savoring of the installation seem to have collapsed into a void of gazing, reminiscence and silent appreciation. The gallery, similar to the entry of its represented everyday life objects, remains awkwardly assimilated within definable categories, signaling a void or "non-category", mediating the believers encounter with the spiritual powers that

the objects evoke and the connoisseurs struggle in realising visible forms, textures and the search for 'truth'. For the method, as we began rummaging for objects, a realisation struck that the presentation of such objects would require a curatorial ploy where the gallery surface would need to be perceived as both antithetical yet intimate with the connoisseural complexities that accompany grander presentations of "art". Whilst these scavenged objects would reside slightly outside the cacophony of the auction room, the visual montage needed to engender the reasonings of the seminar and perhaps even draw upon the seductions of the spectacle



Recovered tree fragment. [Gallery impression]



Documentation of exhumation and recovery of objects from the shrine. [Gallery impression]

or art gallery layout. Convention required that the objects be labeled, contextualised, compared and even burdened with various critiques, but instead the decision was to insist on a pervasive silence, which was considered appropriate for aesthetic attention: alluding to the very moment that the *keramat* and its personalities achieved their "objecthood" or entered the museum. In other words, the gallery that is generated and encountered, speaks of the challenge in representing these difficult fragments, all the while attempting (rather consciously) to resist the trap of nostalgia, but also clarifying the experience of being distanced from the 'original' site. The beholder, I hope, knows himself to stand in that indeterminate and open-ended space – relation as a subject - to the impassive 'objects' on the wall or the floor.

The distance that these objects create is ridden by another implication, which was not fully envisioned prior to the set-up of the gallery: that silent presence of another person who exists differentially from being crowded by the objects vis-à-vis the tendencies of the museum. Signifying a complex form of marginalisation, Wak Ali's voice has been subsumed under a higher modernist agenda. As much as the curatorial method sought to transform the very distance that separates the subject and the object in the dialogic gallery, acknowledging the particular ideological or institutional notions of "audience" as they are articulated or founded or framed: Wak Ali seems to be locked within a double speak of sorts – on the one hand suggesting the encounter between the body of the scavenged fragments and those who stand

before it – reception or consumption – but also questioning the dutiful attitude with which people approach “art” – be it within the academy, museum, biennale, convention. Whilst ethical issues are always present in exhibition making, this particular case took on an added dimension because the exhibition was dealing with objects from a particular time and culture, leading one to confront seemingly contrasting concepts about the right to know and the ability to question. The premise of the museum, circumscribed within a larger non-territorial postcolonial state, aimed at deliberating pedagogy coupled with the ability to tell and know, required a sort of a fluid reconstitution in its curatorial method towards sacred materials; even highlighting the not so easily reconciled aspects of contemporary devotional culture.

Whilst it may be worthwhile launching into a philosophical or deconstructive discussion, there are practical considerations too, which seem to always get taken for granted; referring to all the forced compromises and what may even be called ‘real’ differences in exhibition making. In what occurred as this project unfolded, the practical concerns of selecting what gets to be exhibited, their conservation and the overall maintenance of museological standards, remained somewhat irreconcilable with the scholarly persistence of meaning-making attached to the exhibition. Perched within the context of the museum, could I (as curator) really insist that these scavenged ‘objects’ be reproduced as art forms and confidently assert to the audience that it be regarded as such? Where for instance, does one draw the line between a museum’s role in generating discourse and debate and its responsibility to its source communities? The easy answer to such a dilemma is that more often a fine balance had to be actively sought and at other times sacrifices were made. What drove the curatorial principle was a particular fixation on the gap that seems to exist between contemporary modes of presentation in museums and their popular audiences.

The strategy became one of resisting a formal ethnographic display but still drawing upon theatrical aesthetics, but also emphasising a sustained discursive experience where the various dialogues and tensions between the different collaborators of the project remained at the core – only to be disturbed by the exhibitionary experience of the audience, held within their own physical, intellectual and emotional idiosyncrasies. The approach demanded some amount of risk taking and perhaps even an eagerness to venture into difficult terrain; and while the experimental spirit may be a cause for ‘celebration’, the chances of conveying unintended messages are also high and so are the costs of failure. As a result, it is intended that the gallery space perform a cryptic form of expression, seeking to engage popular myths and enabling a sensory confusion, remaining cognizant that such a ploy can always backfire and end up reinforcing the very predicaments it sought to address. Perhaps, the curatorial dilemma, which existed at the start of the project, continues and manifests itself in a differentiated form, where it can only take effect if one accepts that if the risks are genuine, there will be failures too.



“You see we are nobodies but once this area was majestic, we must tell these stories. These stories or traditions that have been transmitted from mouth to mouth are historical memory of our community, we are entering and passing on the past, through these stories and surviving architectural signs of the saint. Look around, these are real settings, this whole space, structure shows that these stories are real, these things we tell you actually happened – this is history, not myth-tales or entertainments, the history of people attached to the *keramat*.”

Wak Ali Janggut, Custodian, *Keramat Siti Maryam*, Sungei Kallang, 2009



NUS MUSEUM

NUS Museum is a comprehensive museum for teaching and research. It focuses on Asian regional art and culture, and seeks to create an enriching experience through its collections and exhibitions. The Museum has over 7,000 artefacts and artworks divided across four collections. The *Lee Kong Chian Collection* consists of a wide representation of Chinese materials from ancient to contemporary art; the *South and Southeast Asian Collection* holds a range of works from Indian classical sculptures to modern pieces; and the *Ng Eng Teng Collection* is a donation from the late Singapore sculptor and Cultural Medallion recipient of over 1,000 artworks. A fourth collection, the *Straits Chinese Collection*, will be located at NUS' Baba House at 157 Neil Road.



NUS MUSEUM

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10am – 6pm (Sundays)
Closed on Mondays & Public Holidays



The Sufi and the Bearded Man: Re-membering a Keramat in Contemporary Singapore was initially conceived in 2009. It features the *keramat* of a nineteenth-century Sufi traveler from the Middle East who lives on in contemporary Singapore through her miracles and her shrine, which was exhumed in 2010. Re-membering the *keramat* has involved a two-year-long project of collaborating with Wak Ali Janggut (Mohamed Bin Hassan), an intermediary of the Sufi and custodian of the masoleum referred to by fellow devotees as "the bearded man". These conversations culminated in the *keramat* and its life-worlds entering the Museum, a transition animated by the display of photographic evidence, material remains or artefacts, anecdotal histories and related documents. Considering alternative ways to recount and understand heritage, *The Sufi and the Bearded Man*, calls attention to devotional culture, lesser-heard narratives and esotericism in Singapore.

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